Unforgettable
February 27, 2011

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Fourth Presbyterian Church

Psalm 131
Isaiah 49:8–16a
Matthew 6:24–34

"I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands."
Isaiah 49:16 (NRSV)

This morning, in the fresh field,
I came upon a hidden nest.
It held four warm, speckled eggs.
I touched them.
Then went away softly
having felt something more wonderful
than all the electricity in New York City.

Mary Oliver
"With Thanks to the Field Sparrow, Whose Voice Is So Delicate and Humble"
Evidence: Poems by Mary Oliver

Slow us down for a few minutes;
silence all the voices that clamor for our attention.
And then startle us again with your truth, your love,
your lively presence in the world, in the church, and in our hearts.
In Jesus' name. Amen

"Can a woman forget her nursing child or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands."

I was five years old when I last saw the man for whom I am named: John Calvin McCormick. I've told part of his story before; forgive me for repeating it. I have a distinct memory of him walking down a snow-covered sidewalk. My mother's arm is in his. He is her younger brother. It's the winter of 1943. He is in his Marine Corps uniform, home on leave before shipping out, and he and my mother are coming to pick me up at kindergarten. I'm excited. Miss Devries has told the other children that a

Marine in uniform is coming to get me and I am, for a moment, a minor celebrity. A year and a half later, June 1944, he was killed during the United States invasion of Saipan. Six decades later, I am the only person left who knew and remembers him. So I keep his picture on my desk and I tell his story to my children and grandchildren. I never knew where he was buried. When I was on a trip to Hawaii visiting Presbyterian military chaplains on behalf of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), a Naval officer took us on a tour of the beautiful Punchbowl Military Cemetery in Honolulu, where many of the Americans killed in the Pacific island war were later brought to be buried. I told him about my uncle. “Let’s look,” the officer said. There my uncle’s name was in one of the large notebooks in the office registry. We found his grave: PFC John Calvin McCormick, Pennsylvania. I knelt and ran my hand across his name. A few years ago a member of this church, Jan Feldman, whose father was a Naval officer and who was there for the invasion of Saipan, asked her dad on a visit to Saipan to find the war memorial and if he found my uncle’s name, take a picture. He did and took a picture of the granite memorial with its thousands of names of the Americans who died—including my uncle’s—and so now I have it as well. A reminder of him and a reminder, in a sense, of who I am.

When you visit the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. you see the same dynamic: people searching for a name, and when they find it, lovingly tracing it with their fingers, posting a note or a flower, lighting a candle. It is a poignant but very good moment when someone is no longer lost but found, no longer forgotten but remembered.

It is a theme that occurs and reoccurs in the Bible, particularly around that important formative event we know as the exile. Israel has been defeated utterly by the superior forces of Babylon. The army is destroyed, Jerusalem sacked, the temple burned to the ground, and the leaders of society taken prisoner and marched across the desert to Babylon, modern-day Iraq, to live as refugees, exiles. This historic tragedy produced some of the most sublime writing in the Bible in the form of a letter, or a series of letters, written by a prophet, an elegant poet who is left behind in Jerusalem.

The exile was not only a historical tragedy; it was also a deeply theological crisis. If you have been told that you are God’s chosen covenant partner, that God loves you and blesses you, and something like this happens, it is a theological crisis, a religious crisis. How can this be happening to God’s chosen? Why is this happening if almighty God is on our side? The longer the exile went on, the deeper the crisis became. Maybe God has cancelled the covenant. Worse yet, maybe God has forgotten all about us. We’ve been here so long, decades, maybe God doesn’t even remember us any longer. Maybe the whole thing is wishful thinking. Maybe no one is there. Maybe we’re alone, really, ultimately alone, forgotten.

That is the situation to which the prophet writes, and the more you think about it, the more relevant it becomes.

“The Lord has comforted his people and will have compassion on his suffering ones,” the prophet declares.

“Oh yeah,” the captives say. “It looks like the Lord has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me. God doesn’t even know where we are.”

Old Testament scholar and theologian Walter Brueggemann says what comes next are some of the most profoundly poignant words ever written about God: “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb?”

The answer is “of course not.” God is like that; God is more than even that. “Should a mother forget her own infant, I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you in the palm of my hands. “

I read this week that “inscribed” is not strong enough. A better translation of the Hebrew is “engraved” (Sheldon Sorge in *Feasting on the Word*). It’s a little crude perhaps, but this is a tattoo, not the writing of a ballpoint pen. God cannot forget, God will not forget—ever —your name. Every one of your names is on the very hand of God.

Our religion is unique because of two ideas about God, different ideas that must be held together: God is cosmic, the intelligence behind the universe and all the universes we keep discovering. God is majestic, awesome, mysterious, the power beyond all power, the source of all creation, the Ground of Being, the All in All. And God is personal. God is intimate. God knows your name. God does not forget or forsake you—not ever.

There is simply nothing more important or relevant than that.

Is there a moral imperative here? I believe there is an obligation that falls on God’s people particularly not to forget anyone, to remind the rest of society precisely of those who are easily overlooked, forgotten. The homeless who come here every day for food, shelter, clothing, and a reminder that they are not forgotten. Little children who do not vote and are forgotten as we struggle to balance budgets and consider reducing funding for Head Start. Poor women who do not have access to cancer screenings and birth control and so depend on Planned Parenthood, recently the target of ideologues masquerading as responsible budget balancers. Public education, where the poor get the short end of the stick and are out of sight, forgotten.

Presbyterians read this text with eyes and ears and hearts and minds open to ethical and moral and social and sometimes political implications.

Distinguished American author Reynolds Price died a few weeks ago. He was a poet, novelist, essayist, professor of English at Duke. Some thought he was the greatest American writer of our time. Religious and theological themes appear regularly in his writing. He used to call himself an "unorthodox nonchurchly believer."

When he was fifty-one, doctors discovered a spinal malignancy that was life-threatening. Surgery and long bouts of radiation might save his life but would likely leave his legs paralyzed. He decided to proceed with surgery and treatment. I love something he wrote at the time: "God, give me work to do so long as I have life, and life as long as I have work to do."

It was a long and arduous process. But he survived, was in a wheelchair, but continued to live and work for more than two more decades.

He wrote a wonderful book about the experience, *A Whole New Life: An Illness and a Healing*. It's such a good book. In it he writes, "Some vital impulse spared my needing to reiterate the world's oldest and most frequent and pointless question in the face of a disaster—Why? Why me? I never asked it; the only answer, of course, is why not?" (p. 53).

He said that since adolescence he had been praying one short prayer: "Over to you: your will be done." After hearing that he needed yet another grueling operation he expanded the prayer: "Over to you: brace me for it—whatever it is—and thanks for the interesting overtime" (p. 135).

Price was fascinated by Jesus and described a vision he had when propped up in his bed in broad daylight during recuperation from surgery.

He was at the Sea of Galilee, where he had visited the year before. Jesus' disciples were sleeping, so he lay down and joined them. Jesus woke and walked toward him, looking like the Jesus in Flemish paintings. He beckoned Price to follow him into the water. Jesus poured water over Price's wounds and said, "Your sins are forgiven." "It wasn't my sin I was worried about," Price thought and summoned the gall to ask, "Am I also cured?" "That too," Jesus said (pp. 42–43).

After Price returned to work, teaching and writing, a young medical student diagnosed with very serious cancer heard about Reynolds Price and wrote to him, asking that oldest human question: Why? Why me? Price wrote back, and a correspondence ensued that became another wonderful book: *Letter to a Man in the Fire: Does God Exist and Does He Care?*

In it, Price takes his young friend's questions absolutely seriously. "Yes, God exists, and yes, God cares," but Price advises that truth this big is seldom described very satisfactorily, intellectually, or philosophically or in theological propositions. When you are in the fire, you don't need ideas; you need help.

Help comes often in human kindness. In the care of a friend, the soothing touch of a loving hand. We have all seen that—how something of God's love comes through human love; God's compassion in human compassion; God remembering and caring in human remembering and caring.

So, Price suggests, we need art as much as philosophy, stories as much as theological concepts. And so he tells his young correspondent in the fire about an eighty-seven-year-old woman who read about Price's Sea of Galilee vision and described her own very similar dream. She too is in Galilee, by the sea. A crowd is there listening to Jesus teach. She is on the outskirts. Jesus sees her and says, "What do you want?" The woman answers, "Could you send someone to come with me, help me stand up after the tests, because I can't manage alone?" Jesus thought for a moment and then said, "How would it be if I came?" (pp. 30–31).

Trouble comes in one form or another. Serious illness, tragic accident, loss of relationship, loss of income, loss of job and meaning and purpose. Sooner or later I suspect every one of us knows exactly what those exiled people 2,600 years ago were experiencing when they said, "The Lord has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me."

And it is precisely then that these dusty two-and-one-half-millennia-old words become God's Word to us: "Can a woman forget her nursing child,
or show no compassion to the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you"

It's hard to imagine anything more tenacious, more strongly loyal and fiercely devoted, than the love of a mother for her infant.

But there is one thing: God's love, revealed in Jesus Christ.

In the city of Florence, there is a fascinating building, slightly off the beaten path and not at the top of the must-see-spots on a quick, one-day visit. It is the Foundling Hospital, built in 1420 as a refuge for orphans and abandoned infants. Its graceful arcade was designed by Filippo Brunelleschi, the same man who designed the Duomo in Florence. Students of architecture come to see and photograph the Brunelleschi arcade. Today the building houses pediatric clinics, child welfare services, and a small museum. As in fifteenth-century Florence, so is the case tragically, unnecessarily tragically, today: Parents sometimes simply can no longer

feed and care for their children. Sometimes a new baby is simply more than a family, a mother, can manage. Sometimes babies are abandoned, left in front of police stations, churches, hospitals. It happens frequently enough that in some communities abandoning a child in a designated place is no longer a crime but an act of responsible love.

That's what the Foundling Hospital in Florence was for. And in the corner of that arcade there is a marvelous device called the rota: a revolving, lazy-Susan apparatus; a wheel, half of which is outside, the other half inside the hospital. A mother would place her infant on the rota, ring a bell, and a nurse inside rotated the wheel through a tiny opening door and the baby was safely inside. What a moment that must have been.

Can a mother forget her nursing child? Inside the museum we found a glass case displaying fifteenth-century baby clothing and blankets in which infants were wrapped when placed on the rota. And on the top shelf were scraps of ribbon, buttons, and medals that had been cut in half: half affixed to the baby's blanket, the other half kept for the day when the family's fortune improved and the mother could reclaim her child.

I was as moved by this as anything I saw in Florence, because it proclaims a precious truth: the amazing human love of a mother, a father, who cannot and does not forget a child, a child whose name is inscribed in a parent's heart forever, and an image of a greater truth, a relevant truth for each one, everyone:

"Can a woman forget her nursing child? . . . Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands."

Amen.